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CATULLUS AND SHELLEY.

IN the Eternal City repose the ashes of two poets whose works offer many points of resemblance. The one was Catullus, the most passionate and the greatest of Roman lyric poets; the other was Shelley, the very first of the English lyricists. Over the latter many a wordy battle has been waged by his ardent admirers on the one side and his fierce detractors on the other; and Time, the great reconciler, can scarcely be said to have reconciled these opponents. His foes, since their moral nature is shocked by the loose views of morality held by Shelley the man, have in consequence formed a biased judgment of Shelley the poet. Such critics as these, who allow their judgment of a poet to be determined by the life he lived, would condemn Byron as a very ordinary poet of the third or fourth rate; while Bryant, a poet as far inferior to Byron in point of poetic endowment as the former's virtuous and severely puritanic life was superior to the latter's bohemian life, they would perhaps exalt to the highest pinnacle of poetic fame. From the point of view of the critics of this school it is a fortunate circumstance that tradition has not handed down to us more concerning the practices and life of the father of Greek poetry, of Alcæus, and of the burning Sappho. In the judgment of these critics, who lack really the very first essential of literary criticism, an unbiased mind, Catullus, because of his *liaison* with the notorious Clodia, perhaps, does not deserve to be ranked as a poet at all. But the man who allows his prejudices to pervert his judgment is not qualified to sit on a literary tribunal.

Let us, then, laying aside our prejudices, try to view Catullus and Shelley in the calm and dispassionate light of reason, and see if their poetry does possess any qualities in common, or whether these resemblances are simply fanciful, the delusive dream of a feverish imagination.

To begin with, the outward lives of Catullus and Shelley offer a point of resemblance. Catullus was of a very ar-

dent nature, and early fell a victim to the pernicious charms of Lesbia, who seems to have been none other than the famous Clodia, the Palatine Medea whose dissolute life Cicero has painted with so bold a hand in his defense of Cælius. The early age at which Catullus formed this fatal passion and the *abandon* with which he gave himself up to it call to mind Shelley's rash connubial adventures. Witness the latter's union with the schoolgirl Harriet Westbrook, while he at the same time was a fervent admirer of the idealized schoolmistress, Miss Hitchener. Then later, after the separation from Harriet, Shelley's elopement with Mary Godwin suggests, in general, Catullus' suspicion of Lesbia's perfidy and his renunciation of her. But here the parallel, if pressed too far, ceases to hold, for Catullus, after his final renunciation of Lesbia, never seems to have loved another before death claimed him at the early age of thirty. The Lesbia episode occurred during his Werther period, and Catullus never advanced beyond the Werther period. It will be observed that when Shelley died he was but a year younger than "the youthful Catullus."

More, however, in the way of morality, was to be expected of Shelley, the reformer, than of Catullus, who rejoiced that he was permitted to spend his days in the delirious whirl of the gay and glittering capital. But in this respect disappointment awaits us, although his biographers tell us that Shelley was a man of exceedingly pure life. This may be, but he ought at least, atheist though he was, to have observed the time-honored conventionalities of society which form the underlying principle of the family. But morality was not with either Shelley or Catullus, as it was with Wordsworth, the chief concern of life. Perhaps we are to regard Shelley's delinquencies in this regard as manifestations of that revolutionary spirit which was for breaking loose from the conventionalities of society which a wholesome conservatism has fostered from time immemorial. If, then, we consider Shelley in the rôle of a revolutionist, or even of an idealist, we ought not to be surprised at his conjugal relations; for as an idealist he rejected the idea of a material existence,

denying both mind and matter, and living and moving in a kind of abstract, shadowy world, from which all morality and religious truth had been eliminated. Matthew Arnold, adopting the felicitous phrase of Joubert, called Shelley "a beautiful and ineffectual angel beating in the void his luminous wings in vain." This beautiful metaphor, while it may describe the ideal Shelley that we like to picture to ourselves, comes far from describing the real Shelley as his biographers have represented him. The real Shelley was an Angle, not an angel.

But if Shelley, by a figure of speech, can be called an angel, surely Catullus cannot so be called without doing violence to language. He was a man of real flesh and blood, and loved and hated with all the intensity of those diverse passions. And if the English poet lived in an abstract world of shadows, truly the Roman did not, for he was no philosopher. Catullus drew his highest satisfaction and deepest joy from his mingling in the social life of the imperial capital, into which life he threw himself with all the fervor of his nature. Hanging on the lips of his Lesbia like Desdemona on those of Othello, he was perfectly blissful, and was quite content to leave to his fellow-poet Lucretius the world of cold and tedious metaphysical speculation. From such a chilling world as that his impassioned nature would have instinctively recoiled. His theme was the human heart, not the head; and he has given us the history of his own heart, with all its thrills of rapturous joy, and with all its pangs of chilling sorrow when that heart was torn with the pang of unrequited love. Surely he experienced that feeling which Schiller makes the Princess Thekla give utterance to in those profoundly pathetic lines in "Die Piccolomini:"

Ich habe genossen das irdische Glück;
Ich habe gelebt und geliebt.

The genius of both Catullus and Shelley was preëminently lyrical. True, Shelley did attempt narrative and even dramatic poetry, but his efforts in these directions cannot be said to be happy. Indeed, so truly lyrical was his genius, that his longer poems, though they exhibit here and there

snatches of song that thrill us with their joy and ecstasy, are yet, for the most part, absolute failures. For Catullus it can hardly be contended that he essayed any other kind of poetry than the lyric. Both poets sing out of their own feelings, sing out of their own hearts, their joys and longings, their sorrows and regrets. But even here there is a difference. Catullus sings what he really feels, of the passions that swept over his heart for the time, and to these he surrenders himself completely for the present, with no regard to the future. At this point the reader will doubtless recall the thrilling ode to Lesbia, "Let us live, my Lesbia, and love," glowing as it does with all "those myriad happy kisses," and the rapturous delight of that exquisite ode to his villa at Sirmio, "Rejoice, bright Sirmio, in thy master's joy." But with Shelley it was different. He sings not of what he actually feels, but of what he longs to feel; and sometimes his longing strikes a note of hopeless despair, as, for instance, in his inimitable ode to the skylark, in which his longing is truly pathetic. The entire lyric is shot through with a vein of sadness, cropping out most strikingly in that beautiful stanza:

We look before and after,
And pine for what is not;
Our sincerest laughter
With some pain is fraught;
Our sweetest songs are those
That tell of saddest thought.

This vein of sadness is not, however, peculiar to Shelley. Catullus also sounded a sad note, profoundly sad. But we can readily understand why he was sad, when we recall the perfidy of Lesbia, the woman he at first loved as much as his own life. She inspired his song when she first inspired his love; and when she proved false and betrayed his pure affection, his grief was intense and poignant. But even before this stage was reached, when he was experiencing, in the language of Polonius, "the very ecstasy of love," he struck a sad note. Even in this rapture the thought of death loomed up before him like a Brocken specter. But naturally this feeling found its fullest expression in the beautiful and

touching ode to his dead brother, a dirge that breathes no hope of a union in a future world, and in that sad and last ode that he wrote addressed to his friend Coni-ficius. It was these little poems that Macaulay had in mind when he said: "They affect me more than I can explain; they always move me to tears." If we had to choose any of Shelley's verses to put over against these, perhaps we should select the "Stanzas Written in Dejection, near Naples," closing with those pathetic and half-prophetic lines:

I could lie down like a tired child,
And weep away the life of care
Which I have borne and yet must bear,
Till death like sleep might steal on me,
And I might feel in the warm air
My cheek grow cold, and hear the sea
Breathe o'er my dying brain its last monotony.

Neither Catullus' nor Shelley's poetry is buoyant with hope. The latter, in the poem just quoted, distinctly avers that he has no hope:

Alas! I have nor hope nor health,
Nor peace within nor calm around,
Nor that content surpassing wealth
The sage in meditation found.

Theirs is a poetry that seems to terminate with the present world; it does not look beyond the grave to the fruition of an eternal happiness and a glorified immortality. Their poetry lacks spirituality. In fact, neither poet was a spiritual teacher as Tennyson or Wordsworth, or even as Virgil, with certain qualifications, was; and so neither had any spiritual message to his time as these latter poets had. The explanation of this fact is not far to seek. Catullus' creed, if he can be said to have had a creed, did not of course recognize a spiritual life; and Shelley, it is well known, rejected "the consolatory revelation which tells us that we are spiritual beings and have a spiritual source of life." Their poetry is, therefore, not divinely inspired, though inspired it is. But it is an inspiration that has no spiritual element, an inspiration that does not appeal to the highest and noblest emotions that stir the soul and link man with divinity itself.

But however we may censure the lack or absence of the spiritual in the poetry of Catullus and Shelley, we must admire their glowing passion, their frankness, their simplicity, and their spontaneity. Their poetry reflects every emotion of joy or sorrow that touched their hearts, and their *naïveté* is exceedingly refreshing. They seemed to wear their hearts on their sleeves and made no effort at concealment. Indeed, Catullus was too frank, certainly, for modern tastes; and even in his own day, if he had consulted his own interest, he would have suppressed here and there coarse and unworthy passages which mar the beauty of several of his otherwise exquisite lyrics.

But, after all, the poetry of both the English and the Roman singer, if the now celebrated dictum of Matthew Arnold be applied, will alike be found wanting. It is lacking in the "criticism of life," in the broadest sense of that phrase. They both alike offer a "criticism of life," it is true, and Shelley's work brings in a rather severe indictment, but they do not touch life at many points, and there are certain phases of it which neither touches at all. Their range is somewhat narrow and limited. Their poetry appeals directly and chiefly to the young only. It is not addressed to the hearts of the more mature, who can look back upon life from the vantage ground of ripe years. Burning passion, sustained beauty, simplicity, and *verve*, the recognized qualities of poetry of the first water—all these their poetry possesses in a marked degree. But it does not prove satisfying to the heart in all the stages of life, nor to all classes of society. It lacks breadth of sympathy, and lacking this it does not lay hold upon all hearts. It has a perennial charm, but chiefly for the young only. Over these its spell is complete. But for those on the shady side of life it often quite fails to produce the illusion. That stage of life the poets themselves never experienced, for nature never destined their suns to cross the dial of life ere death claimed them. Their poetry, therefore, as some critic has said, shows the limitations of youth, shows what youth can do and what youth cannot do, even though it be coupled with

genius. The mission, then, of these two youthful poets, the passionate Catullus and the ethereal Shelley, so far removed from each other in point of time, but so near in sympathies and tastes, in the glowing ardor of their temperaments, in their susceptibility to the beautiful, in the spontaneous outburst of their emotions, and in their perfect frankness and simplicity withal, was primarily to the young, to teach them, in the phrase of Wordsworth, if not to see and think, at least to feel.

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